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ABSTRACT

As a result of federal legislation, the effects of mainstreaming of special needs students are being felt now more than ever. Regular classroom teachers are responsible for much of the instruction for special needs students, even though they may lack necessary training in effective teaching techniques. Teachers of social studies may feel especially unprepared to deal with the needs of the disabled reader. This digest provides teachers with information and resources for differentiating social studies instruction for students with reading difficulties. Three questions are addressed: (1) Who is the disabled reader? (2) What are the special needs of disabled readers? and (3) What strategies can be used to teach social studies to disabled readers? (DB)

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# Social Studies and the Disabled Reader

by M. Gail Hickey and Patty Braun

The effects of Public Law 94-142 (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975) and its resulting provisions for mainstreaming special needs students are being felt now more than ever. Regular classroom teachers are currently responsible for much of the instruction of these special needs students, even though they often lack appropriate training in effective teaching techniques for the handicapped. Teachers of the social studies may feel especially unprepared to deal with the needs of the disabled reader. This Digest, therefore, provides teachers with information and resources for differentiating social studies instruction for students with reading difficulties. These three questions are discussed: (1) Who is the disabled reader? (2) What are the special needs of disabled readers? (3) What strategies can be used to teach social studies to disabled readers?

**Who is the Disabled Reader?** Most experts agree that any child who is reading two or more grade levels below grade placement should be classified as disabled. Although a wide range of maturational, neurological, and intellectual factors are associated with reading disabilities, we will concern ourselves here with strategies to help poor readers succeed in the regular classroom setting.

Students who are reading two to three grade levels below expectation are overwhelmed by the long reading assignments, definitions, questions, and research reports often required in social studies classes. Special instruction through resource programs frequently centers around basic skills, so that poor readers are additionally handicapped by lack of exposure to the academic, study, and library skills necessary to survive in the mainstreamed classroom.

**What Are the Special Needs of Disabled Readers?** Simms (1988) indicates that poor readers may have difficulty following directions because of a short attention span and memory or vocabulary deficits. The teacher should be concise and clear when giving directions, list steps sequentially, and provide a taped or oral version of written directions. Periodic checkpoints can help break up lengthy assignments into more manageable tasks.

Writing in social studies texts is characterized by main idea/supporting details, fact versus opinion, and variations in reading rate. This style of writing can pose particular problems for disabled readers, who need specific instruction to develop these skills.

Students must be able to determine the main idea in a reading selection and distinguish relevant details from among those presented in order to understand what is read. Direct instruction in comprehension strategies may be necessary when the social studies text is the primary teaching resource.

Sequencing of events and accompanying cause-effect relationships are often represented visually in social studies materials, as in charts, time lines, or diagrams. Such concrete representations of key concepts can be especially helpful to the poor reader; teachers should make a special effort to draw attention to and explain information contained in textual graphics.

The distinguishing of fact from opinion is a critical reading skill, one closely associated with the social studies. Although a higher form of comprehension, the separation of fact from opinion can be taught to even the poor reader, through the use of direct instruction.

Practice in skimming can help prevent disabled readers from becoming bogged down by lengthy passages. Having a purpose for reading gives students an incentive to search for relevant information.

Zipperer (1987) suggests that many reading problems may occur when learners bring insufficient background knowledge to the reading act. The richer the background brought to the reading act by readers, the better their ability to integrate new information from the printed page with the information acquired through prior experiences. Students who lack adequate background in content and language, such as disabled readers, do not comprehend as well as readers with more sophisticated experiential backgrounds. Idol's study (1987), in which she provided modeling of critical thinking strategies to disabled readers during their reading of a social studies text, shows that disabled readers can benefit from the modeling of effective reading skills.

These and other studies further support the need for special instruction for disabled readers in social studies. Peer tutors, cooperative groups, or even a buddy system can facilitate remediation of needed skills. Modeling of effective reading strategies by teachers, providing clear directions in an oral format, and making allowances for insufficient background experiences have also been shown to benefit disabled readers.

**What Strategies Can Be Used to Teach Social Studies to Disabled Readers?** Instruction in study skills can boost the poor reader's achievement and increase self-esteem. Tama and Martinez (1988) suggest the "TELSQA" technique as an appropriate strategy for disabled readers. The teacher introduces the reading

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assignment by reading the title (T) and asking students to hypothesize what it may be about. Using what students already know, the teacher is able to build a conceptual bridge from prior knowledge to new information. Students then examine (E) the reading material; look (L) for important or difficult words and find out what they mean; self-question (SQ) after each paragraph to check understanding; and answer (A) comprehension questions at the end of the section.

The "T-line" approach (Stein 1987) is a form of visualized note taking appropriate to the needs of the disabled reader. On unlined paper, a large "T" is written. Above the "T" three headings are written: "person" on the left, "date" above the vertical, and "event" on the right. Notes are written in chronological order to correspond with the structure provided.

Stein also recommends the "stick person" form of visual note taking, especially when social studies content is people centered. The student draws a simple figure on his or her paper. Information about each person studied is diagrammed in the following fashion.

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ideas - brain
visions/hopes - eyes
words - mouth
actions - hands
feelings - heart
movements - feet
weaknesses - Achilles' heel
strengths - biceps

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Important dates are written below the stick figure's feet at ground level, and background information or family history at the "roots level" beneath the ground.

Because visual notetaking uses both the left and right sides of the brain, the chances for recall are greater, and students feel a sense of accomplishment that merely reading a selection does not provide (Stein 1987).

Generally speaking, the same reading skills good readers employ to interpret social studies content should be taught to less able readers, but more careful attention must be given to direct skills instruction for disabled students. Examples of these skills are presented below:

- Define unfamiliar words in context.
- Recognize main ideas and supply supporting details.
- Recognize cause/effect relationships.
- Distinguish fact from opinion.
- Compare and contrast sources.
- Identify propaganda techniques.
- Use tables of contents, indexes, and glossaries efficiently.
- Decipher relevant information found on maps, charts, and graphs.

Remember that students have different learning style performances, and that there are many ways to teach the same content. If the main teaching strategy used is textbook reading, the disabled reader is sure to suffer. Use a variety of methods to teach the same material. For the disabled reader, these methods may include taped records of written material, interviews, class discussion, and organization of information in charts or graphs (Curtis 1982). Other techniques include the use of oral reports, cooperative learning teams, creation of models or other concrete representations, and frequent modeling of effective study skills.

Bender (1985) suggests providing students with books written at lower reading levels. In addition, teachers of less capable readers should provide direct assistance with reading assignments, provide less difficult materials on the same topic being studied, and make nonreading resources available to poor readers.

Here are other methodologies recommended for teachers of disabled readers (Carbo 1987):

- Read materials aloud while students follow along in their books;
- Tape excerpts from the text for students to listen to in private;
- Have students dictate vital information and then practice reading aloud from the dictated version.

Ford and Ohlhausen (1989) believe that teachers can maximize participation of disabled readers by using a whole language approach, which helps to minimize performance differences among students in the same classroom. Class projects such as a play or production of a newspaper that require many different contributions help ensure that the strengths of all students will be utilized.

Planning social studies instruction to meet the needs of all students, including the disabled reader, is a challenging task. Informed and concerned teachers can find many avenues of assistance, and through increased awareness plan appropriate and effective instruction which motivates and involves every child in their classes.

**References and ERIC Resources**

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.


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